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## AN EXPERIMENT IN HIGH-SCHOOL ENGLISH.

LEST my title seem to promise simply an account of the vagaries of a teacher tired of the beaten track, let me define the sense in which, in the following discussion, I use the term "experiment." By an experiment I mean the continuous test of a theory devised to meet known conditions, and based on known principles of teaching.

The conditions on which my problem is based are those resulting from the literary taste—or lack of taste—of high-school children, as statistically studied by me two years since, in an article in the *SCHOOL REVIEW*.<sup>1</sup> The twenty-five hundred pupils included in my statistics showed that they "lack subtlety, complexity of interest, minute insight, and the sense of form; and consequently they do not relish these qualities in books. Their interest is always in content rather than in style; in the direct story, rather than in one to any degree satiric or symbolic. They do not care for the attempt of one man to interpret the ideals of another, nor for experiments in rhetorical art." Boys throughout the high-school period are romanticists, who are growing to see their ideals in the world immediately about them, tending thus to an interest in realism; while girls show no marked preference for either realism or romance. Furthermore, boys and girls have a common meeting-ground in books rich in both feeling and incident. These results sound like accepted commonplaces of English teaching; that they are not accepted is shown by the list of books prescribed for the admission requirements to colleges. A study, again statistical, of the Freshman class at Harvard with reference to these books showed that many, if not most, of these books are quite beyond the range of high-school pupils' intelligent interest, because they presuppose a vastly wider knowledge of the world, and especially of literature, than the high-school pupil has attained.<sup>2</sup>

Here, then, lies our problem: Can we early in the high-school

<sup>1</sup> ALLAN ABBOTT, "Reading Tastes of High-School Pupils," *SCHOOL REVIEW*, October, 1902.

<sup>2</sup> ALLAN ABBOTT, *Education*, October, 1901.

course greatly extend this apparently narrow range of our pupils' literary experience and literary interests? Can we make it include interest in realism, in character-study, in the personality of the author, in versification, in style as such, in form as well as content? Can we discover a more effective plan for doing this than the present customary practice of taking up successively some six or more "school classics" yearly, and studying them and their footnotes and their appendices?

Such a plan I believe to be not merely discoverable, but practicable, if we are willing to discard certain school-room conventions, especially the formal recitation and the daily mark. We can thus gain time to make our pupils read very widely, for enjoyment, for culture. The familiar doctrine of interest—in its educational sense—will be seen to be at the bottom of this plan. The pupils must be interested in many books; in books in general. They must be brought into the same attitude toward the makers of literature that grown-up lovers of books have; the same attitude which they themselves have toward entertaining books of the day. Such an interest need not by any means be identical with the teacher's interest. We who have specialized in English are prone to forget that the average man of culture—still less the average schoolboy—cares little for the technical discussions that interest students of philology. Who even of us would buy a set of George Meredith with footnotes, however much they might be needed? And frankly, would not the charm evaporate from Herrick and Dekker, from Aldrich and Miss Jewett, if they were bound uniform with the arithmetic and stamped "school classics?"

To reproduce for our pupils, then, conditions that secure the interest of the non-professional book-lover, we must first banish the school edition. Starting with books—real books—we must plan a book orgy, such as any book-lover would enjoy; in other words, we must seize the hours that our pupils will spend reading Henty or Corelli, and fill those hours with reading—for fun—books that we suggest. But here comes the real difficulty. If the world of literature were made up of *Ivanhoes* and *Treasure Islands*, all would be simple; but our task, we remember, is to broaden, to extend as widely as possible, the interest of our pupils, so that they will come

to read for fun books that last year they would barely have read under compulsion.

And here to our aid comes psychology, with her overworked handmaid apperception. The possibility of our success is conditioned on this, that we start from a point where we are sure of the whole heart of our pupils, and lead them step by step farther afield, always linking what is new to what they have previously enjoyed, by means of some interest that the two books have in common, and that the pupils themselves have been made to feel.

The start is obviously romance; the *Talisman*, say, or *Kidnapped*. All enjoy plot; let them study plot, then, and see how a good storyteller weaves the threads of his story together. But shortly they will evince a willingness to talk of character; was Sir Kenneth justified in leaving the standard? The step is then short from a discussion of the relative vividness of Scott's heroes and of his minor characters; and then we are ready to take some book in which minute character-study is a chief feature; something bright and entertaining—say, *Cranford*. We have thus bridged the gap between romantic and realistic novels; it is not beyond hope that, with sufficient attention to our transitions, we may include many more various literary types. The secret of introducing each new method or aim is to make the class understand the attempt, in that direction, of some already familiar writer. Let them, through him, comprehend the nature, the difficulty, and the real interest of the problem; then turn to some other author famous for success in this very thing. Let them at the same time try their own hands at the problem; not that they may hope to produce good plots, genuine characters, musical or even correct verse, but that they may realize just what the problem is, and have due respect for the great men of the world of letters who can solve it.

Based on the foregoing theory, I have for the last two years taught experimentally in the Horace Mann High School a course in second-year English which I may name "Literary Types." In the following summary I have given the work of the first couple of months in full detail, to show the method of handling these rather vague subjects, and of applying the method above referred to in the theme-work; the greater part of the course is summarized much more briefly, as the general method is the same throughout.

## LITERARY TYPES.

## I. The Novel—(A) Romantic.

1. Class reading, on which discussions are based: Scott, *The Talisman*.
2. Outside reading—two of a list of thirty good romances, which are kept on the reserved shelf of the class, in the library: Scott, Cooper, Hawthorne, Dumas, Stevenson, etc.
3. Recitations (informal lectures, reports from class, questions back and forth, leading each day to definite results to be recorded in the notebook).
  - a) Fundamental difference between romance and realism.
  - b) Romantic incidents, and how to tell them.
  - c) Plot: unity, point of view, movement, dénouement.
  - d) Plots of various novels discussed.
  - e) Background of romantic novels.
  - f) Backgrounds for special romantic incidents.
  - g) Romantic character; the hero as a type.
  - h) The heroine; the villain.
  - i) Minor characters; better drawn by Scott than major.
4. Themes (assigned weekly, after discussion of the technical point involved).
  - a) Tell an incident from *The Talisman* not discussed in class.
  - b) Outline the plot of a romance other than *The Talisman*.
  - c) Describe an original background that suggests romance.
  - d) Sketch a character from your outside reading.

## II. The Novel—(B) Realistic.

1. Class reading: Mrs. Gaskell, *Cranford*.
3. Outside reading: any two novels from as varied a list as possible, ranging from Aldrich and Miss Alcott to Thackeray and Miss Austen, and including good work of the present day, such as Miss Jewett's and Miss Wiggins's.
3. Recitations.
  - a), b) Read aloud early chapters, bringing out the realistic quality of the character-work, and so connecting with (i) above.
  - c) Read to class some good background descriptions, as preparation for a theme.
  - d) e) Read and discuss later chapters of *Cranford*.
  - f) Read to class brief character sketches: Major Pendennis at the Club, Miss Bates at the Dance, etc., in preparation for theme.
  - g) Let class select from outside reading, and read aloud, good short character sketches.
  - h) Systematize for the notebooks the impression gained of realistic background and character.
  - i) Realistic plot.
  - j) Humor (passages brought in by class).

4. Themes (distributed as before).
  - a) Sketch from experience or imagination a scene suitable for a realistic story.
  - b) Describe a realistic character.
  - c) Weave (a) and (b) into a plot, making a realistic story of eight or ten pages (double credit).

### III. Essays.

1. In class: Stevenson, *An Inland Voyage*.
2. Outside reading: one hundred pages, from at least two authors, and careful study of the life and writings of one. Authors must be carefully chosen—not too deep. Leigh Hunt, Van Dyke, Warner, Ik Marvel, Lamb, are good.
3. Recitations: very informal, in keeping with the light, chatty tone of the essayists. Attention called to humor, lightness of touch, vigorous bits of description, imaginative phrasing, and underneath it all the author's personality.
4. Themes.
  - a) "A 'Now' Descriptive of a Cold Day" (in imitation of Leigh Hunt's "A 'Now' Descriptive of a Hot Day.")
  - b) The life and personality of some essayist (six pages, double credit).

### IV. Narrative Poetry.

1. In class: Coleridge, *Ancient Mariner*.
2. Outside reading: selections from the ancient folk-ballads, and from good modern narrative verse.
3. Recitations: what is poetry? the old ballads; Coleridge as a romanticist; his diction. *Scansion* should be made a great deal of. Much memorizing, from now on to the end of the year.
4. Themes: stories from ballads; themes based on *Ancient Mariner*; an original ballad (optional)

### V. Tragedy.

### VI. Comedy of Manners.

### VII. Romantic Comedy.

### VIII. Lyric Verse.

The foregoing scheme will have been fortunate indeed if it does not evoke question, if indeed it may not need both explanation and defense. Accordingly, I offer the following explanation of certain features of the course, particularly its position in the curriculum, the method of recitation, the reading, and the theme-work.

The position of this course in the second high-school year is determined largely by the degree of advancement of the pupils. A year earlier they are pretty immature; they are ragged in spelling and

general mechanics, on which they need long and painful drill; and many of the brighter students are so busy adjusting themselves to the change from the grammar school that their minds are not open to such far-reaching and broad work. A year later there is in the air the far-heard whisper of the college examinations; minuter study must begin.

The method of the recitation is, technically speaking, no method at all. The one essential of a good recitation in this course is informality; there should be lectures—by no means technical or prosy—of which the pupils keep notes; there should be plenty of talk back and forth, and a considerable amount of reading aloud, especially of poetry, of which, also, a great deal should be memorized; there should be much reading by the teacher to the class. If it is asked where the disciplinary value of this work comes in, I admit frankly that it does not come in at all. Mental discipline the pupils get in their theme-work; they get it in recitations in other subjects; in English there is something better for them to get—culture. “Culture,” it will be seen, I use in the sense in which it was used by Dr. Furness last year in his commencement oration at the University of Pennsylvania: “Culture is not mental discipline; it is healthy relaxation, mental expansion. . . . Of prime importance is it to read for our own pleasure.”

On this argument, too, is based the very rapid cursory reading of the course; eight books read in class, and at least twenty prescribed outside. This outside reading is checked up by means of small cards, like those of a card catalogue, on which the pupils record whether or not they enjoyed each book, and write four or five lines explaining what they found particularly striking in it. Beyond these cards they are held responsible only for the most general knowledge of the books, to illustrate principles being talked of in the classroom.

In the theme-work as free a hand is given to the pupils' imagination as possible. Definite subjects are seldom assigned; the theme is usually a problem connected with the class-room work. When the pupils are reading *Cranford*, they try their hands at realistic character or background description; when they read the essay, they try a description of a cold day, in imitation of Leigh Hunt's “‘Now’—

*Descriptive of a Hot Day;*" when they read the *Ancient Mariner*, they have the option, at least, of trying an original ballad. This very helpful attempt to write verse they greatly enjoy, so long as it is not required, but alternative with another subject. Furthermore, work of any nature printed in the school paper is accepted in lieu of an equivalent amount of theme-work; for the object of the themes is not to cover a certain definite ground, but to stimulate self-expression in as great a variety of directions as possible.

The crucial question, after all, is: How does it work? To my somewhat prejudiced eyes it works well. It certainly awakens interest in the class. A football boy—of whom one would not, normally, expect enthusiasm on literary subjects—recently told me he was getting much more out of his English than formerly; that he enjoyed the distinctions and principles of classification studied in class, and liked to apply them in his own reading. Another boy, near the foot of the class, talked all the way to school of the unity and movement shown in the plots of Captain Marryat. An entire class of twenty insisted on staying after time, at the noon hour, to hear the end of a chapter from Jane Austen.

But this growth of interest is not merely the love of being entertained. There seems to be a marked growth in the power to pass individual judgments; to read a new book and to get the real gist out of it. This individualism comes out of the report cards for outside reading. One girl says, after reading *Oliver Twist*: "Dickens has put so many people in it that one never knows what he is talking about." Another likes Book I of the *Inferno*: "Very beautiful and majestic; Dante interests one from the start." Others say: "Othello acts first and thinks after; if he had thought more and done less, he would have been much happier." "*Macbeth* would be very terrible to play on the stage; it is ghastly and uncanny." "[*Little Rivers*] shows that the author was a very close observer of nature. Lots of pretty and original similes in it." "Leigh Hunt's essays are very much easier to read than Lamb's or Hazlitt's. The essay on *Spring and Daisies* for some reason or other made me feel fresh." "[*Paradise Lost*, Book I] was very hard to understand, but I read it very carefully, and began to get interested in it. It seems to take a very roundabout way to express a thought." "[Virgil, *Aeneid*] liked for



its movement and description. Virgil's description of battles and hand-to-hand conflicts is magnificent." "[*Tom Brown's School Days*] shows up the pranks of boys in fine style; a great deal better than Kipling's *Stalkey & Co.*" "[*Comedy of Errors*] I never read anything before that made me laugh so much." "[*Ivanhoe*] Introduction rather tedious, but very interesting later on. I liked Rebecca better than Rowena because there was more to her." "[*Æschylus, Prometheus Chained*] I enjoyed this work greatly; it is so well and vividly told that I see the whole story enacted before me."

These random quotations are merely snapshots of the pupils' literary judgment; but, like snapshots, they have the merit of lack of pose; crude as they are, they are sincere, and represent a genuine reaction of the individual pupil, founded on real interest in the book.

This interest, though, I find extends beyond the world of books. In their longer themes the pupils show decidedly a growth of interest in the world about them, through the study of realism; and in the world of thought, largely through *Hamlet*. They come to enjoy minute observation of nature, of city life, and especially of people. Some of their very amateur character-studies are far from despicable in themselves, and are of great moral value in opening the writer's eyes to the actual personality of people he daily meets, and in extending his sympathy beyond his own selfhood.

The practical teacher will demand if this scheme teaches pupils to write; if it gives them purity of style, clearness, force, ease, and the other virtues of the rhetorician. In my belief it does, and far more effectively than does any course, at this age, in formal rhetoric. Whichever method is adopted, petty errors can be cured only by painstaking correction and ceaseless revision; but the positive merits of clear and forceful writing are gained best, in high-school years, by absorption, by unconscious imitation. Just as we learn to speak grammatically by association with cultured people, so we learn to write effectively by association with great books. So that the cursory method of instruction outlined above teaches the art of writing, as well as developing reading tastes, individuality, and character.

The results of my experiment, then, are as follows: that in the second high-school year pupils gain much by the rapid reading of diverse types of literature, provided that these be bound together

by links of association; that such a course is more effective than the usual minute study of a few books in stimulating interest in literature and in broadening the pupil's character; and that it is more effective than the usual text-book rhetoric work in developing a clear, forceful, easy style and a real enjoyment of self-expression. If these results do not seem to my fellow-teachers to be firmly established, I can only hope that my attempt may suggest similar lines of experiment to others.

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